

Review: Jamie S. Davidson: Twenty years of democracy: elements in politics and society in Southeast Asia

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Book Review:

Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy

Diotima Chatteraj*

***Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy (Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia)* by Jamie S. Davidson, 2018, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

Making democracy the central point, Jamie Davidson's book *Indonesia: Twenty Years of Democracy (Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia)* considers the impact of regime change that has affected the "super diverse country" of Indonesia, which consists of 17,000 islands and is home to 300 ethnic groups, among whom more than 700 languages are spoken (p. 5). The author argues that, amidst comparative perspective in regard to the country's accomplishments, Indonesia's amazing performance in the recent elections after twenty years of democratisation has set a new trend for its neighbors. However, inspecting the political regime, economy, and the emergence of identity-based mobilisations, the author claims that Indonesia is still coping with several challenges that could potentially harm many of the democratic gains the country has achieved since the forced resignation of Soeharto on May 21, 1998.

The book begins with the resignation of the six times Indonesian President Soeharto, under whom the country experienced thirty-two years (1967-1998) of authoritarian rule. His sudden resignation not only shocked the entire nation, but also pushed Indonesia into an arduous journey toward an uncertain future. Following constitutional procedures, Vice-president B. J. Habibie took office, and the next year Indonesia's first national democratic elections since 1955 took place. This is because democracy was considered to be the most desired direction for the citizens of the country. Predictions came in the way that 'Indonesia would become Southeast Asia's freest democracy for the better part of two decades' (p. 1).

The author then speaks about Soeharto's coming to power as the President of the country and elaborates about his regime. He demonstrates that democracy and its related process of democratisation is the most appropriate overarching framework for studying Indonesia. The author further argues that the Indonesian democracy in the post-Soeharto regime has become distracted because of the weakened and corrupted state institutions, increasing inequality, high rates of poverty, distrust in the judicial system, a rise in unemployment and uncertain security issues for the citizens. Therefore, the central focus of this book is on tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictory puzzles of Indonesia's democracy. Also, Davidson addresses issues like globalisation versus nationalism, corruption versus good governance, sectarianism versus secularism, economic growth versus equitable development, oligarchy versus pluralism, and decentralisation versus recentralisation in relation to the successes and deficits of Indonesia's democracy. As per the current date, Davidson argues that Indonesian democracy, like all other democracies, is under threat and is always on the verge of improvement.

Again, Davidson identifies that post-Soeharto Indonesia has been dominated by a "change and continuities" framework (p. 5), conceiving the New Order and post-New Order periods as monolithic, glossing over the deep changes that occurred within each historical era. The book also shows the emergence of left and right group scholars due to the variety of interpretation of the country's economic growth. The right groups believe that the political stability in the days of Soeharto was responsible both for economic expansion and for uplifting the poor, while the left is in opposition to the rights and claimed that the lives of the masses have remained unchanged. Furthermore, the ongoing problems are products of the new democratic order, which includes a worsening investment climate caused largely by an unsteady policy environment and a chaotic diffusion of corruption enablers and opportunists. Thus, Davidson claims that many of the

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challenges to Indonesia's democracy are Soeharto's legacies.

A significant part of the book deals with the post-Soeharto era, which has been divided into three main periods and further, into sections: 'a politics subsection', which scrutinises party politics, electoral outcomes, changing rules of the electoral and party systems, and the local politics of decentralization; 'a political economy subsection', which demonstrates the management of Indonesia's huge economy and the means through which groups access state benefits and the country's trove of natural resources; and finally, the last subsection focuses on the rise of old and new identity-based mobilisations of marginalised groups and their impact on local society and national politics.

Following this, there is the section on 'Innovation', which covers the country's transition from authoritarianism to democracy, showing the breeding of some successful and unsuccessful reforms. This period was characterised by uncertainty, ferment, hope, and despair along with visible changes in the institutional, political and economic landscape. With the aim to improve the country's dire condition, several political and apolitical organisations provided help and support. This section elaborates on the series of constitutional amendments that were sought to guarantee Indonesians a range of freedoms and democratic rights. A five-year presidential term was also introduced. The establishment of the Constitutional Court forced the state to uphold its obligations to provide access to a fair trial, to protect its citizens from corruption, to guarantee other rights and to lift the ban on political participation. This transition period also sparked significant "innovations" in the way identity-based groups, namely, Conservative Islam, Chinese Indonesians and an outer-island marginalised ethnic group (seeking empowerment through a revival of tradition) coalesced and mobilised. They were acutely marginalised by decades of authoritarian rule.

This section gave way to the next section 'stagnation', which demonstrates the shattering vibes among the citizens of Indonesia. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the two-term president, became victim of outsized expectations. Though Indonesia remained democratic, Yudhoyono's governments failed to improve the quality of that democracy meaningfully. It was also clear that Indonesia started losing its fame for being tolerant and 'respect for religious pluralism' in the hands of some nonviolent and extremist groups (p. 37). Therefore, Indonesia's twentieth century, as Davidson argues, was characterised as a 'pitched' battlefield where the proponents, against the opponents of Islamisation, became popular with the progress of the new century (p. 38). Indonesian society and politics, thus, headed towards a 'polarisation': the subject of the next section.

Section 4 'polarisation' details the emergence of a potentially destabilising divide in the post-Yudhoyono period. Indonesia's ruling president Joko Widodo is both cause and effect of the severing of political Islam and pluralism and their division into opposing camps. Struggles are still ongoing over material resources, as well as on the progression from contestation over the design and control of governance institutions 'to fierce politicking over state ideology, national identity, and citizenship' (p. 7).

Finally, section 5 acts as the conclusion, where Davidson identifies several reasons which act as a threat to democracy for Indonesia: namely, extreme ethnic and religious heterogeneity, Islamic nationalism among a part of the population that comprises more than 85 percent of the total population, substantial factions oligarchs, and military personnel, 'low development, rich natural-resource endowment, growing inequality, weak institutionalization of constraints on executive power, and a neighborhood (Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia) checkered support for democracy' (p. 54). Davidson finally concludes that if the minorities continue to get inadequate protection, Indonesia's democracy will surely be in danger and the state should look upon reducing poverty and diminishing inequality, so that the country can run successfully.

Scrutinising the post-Soeharto period, this book proves more fruitful than searching for changes from or continuities with Soeharto's regime. What happens to Indonesia's democracy will likely have more to do with developments and dynamics of the post-Soeharto era. The author clearly shows that the democratic regime of the country will be in danger if the minority rights are not looked after well. Nevertheless, this well-written book is both thought-provoking and policy-relevant. Hopefully the elements inform the important debates on democracy that so often seem bereft of any nuance. This book would be an asset not only to Indonesian or South-East Asian readers, but

also to a wider audience who seek a deeper understanding of the different elements of politics and society. The bulk of this book, though, is based on the different regimes from Soeharto until Joko Widodo, a significant part is also invested on the Islamic regime and the threats minorities face due to the democratic rule. This well-versed book contributes to the fields of politics and society but is really of much wider significance.

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